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What Becomes of the Subject?

Graham MacPhee
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, gmacphee@wcupa.edu

EDITORIAL REMARKS

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More than twenty-five years ago, Jean-Luc Nancy posed the question, "Who comes after the subject?"[1] Nancy's formulation sought to encourage responses to the "critique or deconstruction of the subject" that went beyond the terms of the reductive proclamation of "the subject's simple liquidation" (Cadava, Connor, and Nancy 1991, 4–5). Crucially, the "who" in Nancy's question signaled that the critique of the subject does not imply the abnegation of questions of subjectivity, but in coming "after the subject" the temporality of questioning would be opened to futurity: we continue to ask "who?" but the answer is no longer prescribed (as "the subject"). In these terms, the crisis of the subject so remarked by contemporary philosophy would not be understood as marking a theoretical stasis or as closing down questioning; rather, the question of subjectivity ("who?") would become a site of inquiry and opening.

Although posed a quarter of a century ago, Nancy's question is worth recalling now as a gauge to measure contemporary critical discourse. What is particularly striking in this light is the absence of the kind of plural and dynamic inquiry that Nancy's question promised, a mode of inquiry that would be sensitive to the historicity of subjectivity and the multiple trajectories to which it might give rise. Instead, we witness the stubborn persistence of "the subject" frozen in the instant (*Augenblick*) of its perennial deconstruction. How many times does the analysis of a text unearth or discover the claim to presence of "the subject" only to show how the text "disrupts," "unravels," or "deconstructs" it? And how many times do we trace the operation of power through the disciplinary production of "the subject" in social practices and institutions, only to chart the multiple nodes of "resistance" that "transgress" and "subvert" its terms? This is not to denigrate or disallow subversion, or disruption, or resistance, or any other of these terms;

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nor is it in any way to call for an affirmative intellectual culture. It is rather to point to a curious temporal structuring which appears to be remarkably prevalent within contemporary theory. Where Nancy's question envisages deconstruction or critique as a moving beyond the subject ("who comes after?"), we inhabit a theoretical Groundhog Day that is perpetually suspended at the moment of the subject's deconstruction—which means that the subject endures and becomes oddly durable in its perpetual deconstruction.

One way of understanding this predicament is to identify a failure in thinking the historicity of subjectivity. This failure becomes apparent when we recall the near-ubiquity of the expression "the Enlightenment subject" and the role that it often plays in contemporary theory.[2] Despite being nominally tied to a historical moment and a geographical region, "the Enlightenment subject" appears as an unchanging configuration of subjectivity which endures today exactly as it was in its initial formulation some three centuries ago. Perennially recurring and perennially the same, "the Enlightenment subject" must be deconstructed over and over again. But, crucially, its deconstruction has no issue or outcomes, and so cannot generate different possible configurations of subjectivity. Instead, there is only the perpetual oscillation between the subject's claim to full presence and its dispersal, fragmentation, disruption, and subversion. For all the claims for the "deconstruction" and "subversion" of the subject, it would appear that it remains resolutely and implacably in place, pristinely awaiting its next deconstruction and subversion.

A sense of this failure to think the historicity of subjectivity becomes palpable if we set it against an alternative approach, namely Gillian Rose's account of post-Reformation subjectivity. For Rose, the Enlightenment subject has not remained perpetually frozen but carries the potential to develop and mutate in unexpected ways. Indeed, it is itself recognized as a moment within a larger set of histories that she characterizes in terms of "*the unintended psychological and political consequences* of Protestant *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) and worldly asceticism" (Rose 1998, 87; emphasis in original). Rather than marking the final locking into place of an epochal epistemic shift, what is so often cast monolithically as "the Enlightenment subject" is understood by Rose as one formulation of the unstable configuration of subjectivity launched by the Reformation, which then lurches through a dizzying array of mutations and transformations:

> The Protestant doctrine of salvation creates hypertrophy of the inner life. Hypertrophy of the inner life is correlated with atrophy of political participation. Eventually, the interest in salvation itself atrophies, but the inner anxiety of salvation persists and is combined with worldly opportunity and ruthlessness; this combination of anxiety and ruthlessness amounts to the combination of inner and outer violence. (Rose 1998, 87)

From this perspective, each configuration of modern subjectivity—and the Enlightenment subject is just one of them—is comprised of multiple vectors that combine dynamically to generate new and unexpected configurations, so that earlier elements may endure and be reproduced but in transformed ways.

Ironically, what keeps the Enlightenment subject continually suspended at the moment of its deconstruction is the concern that any attempt to describe or chart its issue will install a new model of subjectivity as the end or result of a grand narrative of historical development. As we know, the many iterations within European thought of such developmental narratives have had catastrophic consequences on a global scale. Understandably, this legacy weighs heavily on contemporary theory, which sees in any history of subjectivity's recognitions and misrecognitions only the violence of the other's exclusion from recognition (as deviant, savage, or pathological) or the liquidation of its alterity in its (mis) recognition as a version of the subject. But we also need to be aware that failure to recognize the historical development of subjectivity also has costs and consequences. If we can only imagine an alternative to "the subject" as its perennial dispersal without history and without issue, then we blind ourselves to the new modes of subjectivity that are conditioned by the social disintegration and fragmentation of experience which so mark the predicament of contemporary global capitalism. And in denying agency to subjectivity we deny it also to the other, whose alterity is now betrayed not in the reflected image of the subject's activity but in the passivity of its dispersal. For, as Gillian Rose reminds us, "the other too is distraught and searching for political community—the other is also bounded and vulnerable, enraged and invested, isolated and interrelated' (1996, 37). And, as she warns, "without the soul and without the city"—that is, without the historical identity/nonidentity of inner life and political community—"we cannot help anyone," least of all ourselves (38).

NOTES

[1] The question provided the occasion and the title for a special issue of the journal *Topoi* (September 1988), which was subsequently published in English as a volume of essays edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy (1991).

[2] Associated with the loose usage of "the Enlightenment subject" is the conflation of post-Enlightenment thinkers seeking to respond to the Enlightenment as simply "Enlightenment thinkers" or as representing "Enlightenment thought." I would argue that in fact the framing of Nancy's question suffers from just such an undifferentiated conflation of modern thought before Heidegger; see Cadava, Connor, and Nancy 1991, 6. Significantly, Gillian Rose differentiates within modern thought by identifying a number of post-Enlightenment thinkers—Goethe, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Weber, and Benjamin—who are in different ways concerned with exploring "*the unintended consequences* of the Protestant Ethic" (1998, 87; emphasis in original).

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